

The Absence of Europe: Implications for International Security?

by Steven Philip Kramer

Key Points

Facing a worsening economic situation and a war in Iraq that will be difficult to end—in short, grave overstretch—the next U.S. administration will seek to return to a more multilateral foreign policy and attempt to work closely with Europe. But Europe may not be willing or able to meet American expectations to play a larger role in international security.

Europe has not become a federal United States of Europe, as French statesman Jean Monnet hoped, and it has failed to achieve consensus on institutions. At least for the next year, the European Union (EU) will be trying to find a way around the June 2008 defeat of the Lisbon Treaty, the set of institutional reforms aimed at streamlining the work of the enlarged union. Without adequate institutions to formulate and implement a common foreign policy, the EU cannot make effective use of military force. And without greater capability, Europe—whether as the EU, through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or as individual states—will punch below its weight.

The EU has derived much of its influence from enlargement, but it seems to have lost its nerve over the possibility of Turkish membership. NATO expansion, meanwhile, has inflamed Russian resentments and helped to trigger the Georgian crisis. A more assertive Russia could divide Europe and complicate transatlantic ties; a threatening Russia could cement them.

There are two further limitations to effective European action on the international level. The

first is that Europe will be focusing on economic and social issues. The second is a lack of agreement among key European leaders.

One change that can result in better U.S.-European relations is an end to tension between the United States and France. President Nicolas Sarkozy's intention to return France to full NATO membership in 2009 provides the opportunity to restore relations.

In short, Europe's ability to work with (and influence) the United States is limited by its self-imposed weakness in international security, which is the logical consequence of the EU's political structure and worldview. America may have no choice but to turn to Asia for support if it wishes to remain an international arbiter. Perhaps a different kind of relationship with a more activist China and India will be needed to manage global instability. If so, the Euro-American age will have come to a close.

Reengaging Europe

In the face of economic and military difficulties, the next U.S. administration will likely return to a more multilateral foreign policy. It will look favorably on working with international organizations. It will focus on greater cooperation with allies. Above all, it will turn to Europe.

But how will Europe respond when the next American President seeks to renew the Euro-American partnership? What will the policy implications be if Europe cannot respond to an American overture for real partnership?

Europe has been our most important strategic partner since World War II and

remains a central player in the world. The 2003 Iraq War shook the foundations of U.S.-European relations. Although dialogue has improved since 2003, we have not yet recovered the close friendship that existed previously. The George W. Bush administration is following a different policy toward Europe than it did in its first term, but only a new American President and a new political orientation can improve the political climate, making possible a constructive transatlantic dialogue and ultimately a new global project. A better relationship with Europe is not only an end in itself, but also an important means of managing the increasingly disorderly world in which we live.

Renewing relations with Europe will require the United States to take into account European sensitivities and priorities. This will include a clear American willingness to put diplomacy first and the use of force only as a last resort—as, for example, in the case of Iran. The Europeans would like us to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a more balanced point of view. They want the United States to address climate change as a priority, as they have done. There should be no reason why the United States cannot satisfy these European wishes, since these policies would be in our interest as well.

It is not clear, however, that Europe will be able to respond even to an American initiative of which it approves. There are great limits to what Europe can do, and to what it wishes to do, globally.

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What Kind of Europe?

Jean Monnet's vision for an integrated Europe had two main dimensions: to end Franco-German conflict and, with it, European wars; and to create a United States of Europe. The first goal has been achieved beyond all hopes. Western Europe has become a peace zone, and since the fall of the Soviet Union, the European Union (EU) has successfully incorporated the Warsaw Pact and Baltic countries. Old feuds, like those between Germany and Poland, and Hungary and its neighbors, have been defused. The EU is attempting to do the same thing in the Balkans. Although the problems there are notoriously difficult to resolve, some states, such as Croatia, are casting aside their traditional enmities and moving toward a Western orientation.

But the EU is not now, and is unlikely to become, the United States of Europe. Was this ever a realistic possibility? Could the nations of Europe, with their diverse cultures and languages, have become a federal state? Would they have surrendered many of their key powers to a freely elected European government? At least in the 20 years following World War II, leaders seemed to take this possibility seriously. If Europe has not become federated, however, the blame should not be projected on the "periphery": the United Kingdom, Scandinavian nations, and states of the former Soviet bloc. It lies rather with the ambivalence of the founders of federation—above all, with France.

The debate over the nature of Europe has been largely a Franco-French debate. Jean Monnet based European integration on a federal model. In the 1960s, Charles de Gaulle arrested movement toward federalism. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and François Mitterrand did not share de Gaulle's discomfort with European integration and began to conceive of Europe as a vehicle for French influence in the world—a kind of France writ large—but they wanted a Europe that was primarily intergovernmental, not federal.

After its enlargement to include the former Warsaw Pact states, the EU needed to

change its institutional structure. In 2004, d'Estaing presided over a constitutional convention that he unwisely compared to the one held in Philadelphia in 1787. What was produced at the convention was far less than a new founding document, far less than a real constitution. Nor did the document (not really a constitution but a compendium of treaties as modified) represent a people's Europe. It was not achieved by popular means and would not be governed by them. Moreover, a system of European government that is not democratically elected will always suffer from a problem of legitimacy. The French and Dutch voters turned the constitution down.

After 2 years of travail, EU leaders thought they had rescued key institutional elements of this constitution in the Lisbon Treaty. This document was kept as

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far away as possible from the voters on the pretext that it did not really constitute a significant change to EU institutions. But Irish law required a referendum, and Irish voters turned it down. So another year will be spent on deciding whether the Lisbon Treaty can be resubmitted to the Irish electorate or whether Europe will have to live with the current institutional framework (created by the Nice Summit) that it is struggling to replace. The EU model seems to have reached the end of its effectiveness, but it cannot be changed either.

Without adequate institutions to formulate and implement a common foreign policy, the EU cannot make effective use of military force. And without greater capability, Europe—whether as the EU, through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO),

or as individual states—will punch below its weight. The United Kingdom and France have struggled to maintain state-of-the-art militaries that can act independently or under NATO or EU command (but as the new French White Book on defense shows, France cannot sustain current defense spending and will decrease boots on the ground). Germany, Europe's richest and most populous nation, has a small defense budget and an antiquated defense structure. Its passive resistance to defense spending minimizes Europe's role in global security. The maintenance of systems of national—and in some cases, territorial—defense in the rest of Europe means that most of the money spent will do little to create real European capability. It used to be said that Europe spent 60 percent of the American military budget and got 10 percent of its capability. That is not likely to change greatly. A new study from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) suggests ways to improve Europe's ability to intervene globally. It points out that only 2.7 percent of all service personnel can deploy abroad on crisis management operations. It advocates better use of existing defense budgets, better procurement, and closer Franco-British cooperation as the backbone of European cooperation.¹ But even under favorable circumstances, these changes would produce quantitative, not qualitative, improvement.

As the IISS report states, behind the issue of budgets and capabilities is the question of will. Robert Kagan has pointed out that Europe and America were diverging, the former moving in a Kantian direction, the latter in a Hobbesian.² According to Judy Dempsey, who chronicled Europe's stumbling efforts to end Balkan conflict in the 1990s, the problem is not that the Europeans criticized the U.S. tendency to prefer hard power to soft power but that they are unwilling to accept that in some situations soft power alone is not sufficient. European efforts to apply soft power in Afghanistan have failed. Europeans were content so long as the United States

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opposed creation of a vigorous European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP).³ Now that the United States accepts its value, “Europeans are not intellectually—let alone militarily—prepared to go down that road.”⁴ Taking into account Europe’s limited willingness to invest in hard power, one is struck by the almost mythic quality of the 20-year debate over ESDP, which proved so divisive to Europeans and so damaging to transatlantic relations even before Iraq.

The Price of Enlargement

Another source of Europe’s weakness in global affairs is a result of “enlargement fatigue.” Much of the vaunted soft power of the EU stems from its attractiveness to surrounding states who aspire to membership. The prospect of membership helped consolidate democracy in Spain, Portugal, and Greece in the 1970s and in the states of the old Soviet bloc after the Cold War, and enabled the latter to weather the stressful transition to a market economy. It was the catalyst for resolution of longstanding rivalries and conflicts over minority rights and borders. The EU is attempting to do the same thing in the Balkans, an area that is notoriously difficult to reform. Recently, the EU played its cards well by leaving the door open to Serbian accession so as to favor Boris Tadic’s reelection as president of Serbia. His success then facilitated the capture of Radovan Karadzic, creating a virtuous circle that made further progress on membership possible.

The EU has also paid an economic and political price for enlargement. Clearly, enlargement is directly responsible for the current institutional crisis. By admitting Cyprus before resolution of the communal question, the EU lost its leverage over the Greek Cypriot government, and Cyprus remains divided. Some of the new members have provided entrée into the EU for organized crime syndicates. There is a lot of unfinished business in the Balkans, and admitting Balkan states could further complicate the EU.

Effective use of EU soft power to transform a nation through the prospect of membership has not played out according to plan with Turkey. The rules of the game were that membership would follow once

chapter-by-chapter negotiations were successfully closed. For a long time, the EU did not negotiate membership with Turkey because of the Greek veto. Once that threat was withdrawn, the Recep Tayyip Erdogan government did a brilliant job of eliminating the EU’s alibis for postponement of membership negotiations by addressing issues of democracy and rule of law in Turkey and by playing a constructive role in the United Nations Cyprus negotiations.

The EU formally opened talks with Turkey in 2005, but the rules of the game have since changed. Sarkozy has blocked negotiation of a series of crucial chapters. It is no longer the case that successful completion of negotiations will automatically result in Turkish membership. Leaders of several EU nations such as Germany, Austria, and France continue to oppose Turkish membership. The French erected barriers to Turkish membership by requiring a popular referendum on new EU members. (The French constitution has once again been changed, so that a 3/5 vote of the National Assembly and Senate together can permit ratification of new EU members by a parliamentary vote rather than by referendum.)

Initially, the Turkish population welcomed the prospect of joining the EU, and the government was able to use the leverage of membership to institute important but difficult reforms. But an increasing sense that the EU’s attitude was duplicitous and inspired by a reluctance to accept a majority Muslim nation into a Christian club moved Turkish opinion against EU membership. Of course, the Turks have not done themselves any favors, both in terms of their internal politics and their blocking of EU–NATO ties.

Turkish membership would greatly change the meaning of “European,” giving it a more multicultural dimension. The EU would border on the Middle East and could assume a much larger role in stabilizing the region. Refusal to negotiate Turkish membership in good faith seems like a loss of nerve on the part of Europe and would be accompanied by a loss of influence as well. It is hard to imagine that Europe can be complete without including the New Rome as well as the Old.

The process of NATO expansion has led to something worse than “enlargement

fatigue.” NATO expansion was, perhaps for want of a better project, the major transatlantic venture of the post–Cold War period. Europe participated (with varying degrees of enthusiasm or reluctance), but the United States led. Russia saw NATO expansion as a

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new form of containment, which it probably was (in part). Russian concerns grew as the United States advocated NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine.

Russia’s use of force against Georgia has abruptly called the American bluff on enlargement. Georgian leaders must have believed that, official American comments to the contrary, the United States would come to their aid if an effort to recover Ossetia led to a Russian military reaction. But the United States was not willing to take any kind of military action on behalf of Georgia and did not even send American forces to Tbilisi to “protect” American citizens, thereby demonstrating a commitment to Georgia’s survival as an independent nation.

Georgia is not a NATO member. But would NATO and the United States have acted differently if it was? And if not, what is the value of NATO membership? What does this mean for Ukraine and other former Soviet republics, or even for former Warsaw Pact states? Suddenly, many nations are feeling insecure.

Russia has won a huge tactical victory that will make other former Soviet republics think twice about seeking closer ties with the United States and NATO. It is possible that they will heed this lesson and seek ways to accommodate a resurgent Russia. Conversely, heavy-handed Soviet behavior in the 1940s brought on the Cold War and inspired the U.S. policy of containment, and it is not obvious that such a policy today is in the long-term Russian interest. Nor is supporting independence for minority groups in the

indubitable interest of the Russian Federation. Was Russia thinking strategically or tactically? Perhaps there will be no winners from the Georgian crisis.

How will Europe respond to a more assertive Russia? At this point, it is too early to tell. A more assertive Russia could divide Europe and complicate transatlantic ties; a threatening Russia could cement them. But one thing is certain: the Russian question has reemerged as a major concern for Europe and America.

Europe Divided?

There are two further limitations to effective European action in the face of looming global challenges. The first is that Europe will be inwardly focused: on a sluggish economy, the crisis of the welfare state, and immigration and the assimilation of immigrants, especially Muslims. The second constraint—a very serious one—is a lack of convergence among key European leaders.

All politics is local politics, and most European politics still occurs within the national framework. European nations are preoccupied with issues having little to do with international security or the institutional processes of European governance. The issues are similar in most countries: chronically slow economic growth exacerbated by the current recession; relatively high unemployment and a rigid labor market; an aging population and low birth rates, often resulting in negative growth of the native population; an extensive welfare state that can no longer be afforded but that is politically hard to reduce; and fear of immigration, especially Muslim immigration (although in general, immigration has been greatly reduced), and the problem of assimilating Muslim populations who are often marginalized economically and socially. It is hard to convince voters that more money should be spent on defense when there is no obvious threat, when European leaders have preached the superiority of soft power over hard, and when the public is reluctant to get involved in shooting wars such as Afghanistan. The less capability a country has, the less chance of having to use it.

In the past, Franco-German cooperation was the key to an effective EU. Today,

that cooperation is necessary but no longer sufficient. At a minimum, there needs to be agreement between the “big three”—France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—and it is important for other large states such as Italy, Spain, and Poland to be on board. The problem is that there is not much convergence among the big three leaders, and their domestic political bases are shaky.

The major policy differences occur between Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel—above all due to Sarkozy’s support for European protectionism and his persistent criticism of the independence of the European Central Bank, both articles of faith of German policy. Sarkozy riled Merkel by proposing a Mediterranean initiative without prior discussion with the Germans; it was to be financed by the EU but would not include the northern states. But there is also a lack of personal warmth between the two leaders. The United Kingdom has never been willing to cast its lot fully with the EU, but without British support, the EU can no longer be governed. Although British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has shown himself to be less Euroskeptic than many had feared, he is hardly full-throated in his commitment. Nor is it obvious that the United Kingdom is comfortable with the new French ardor for NATO and the tradeoffs that might be implied.

Sarkozy has low popularity ratings; his personal style diverges from the norms of the Fifth Republic. The unity of Merkel’s Grand Coalition could be the victim of approaching elections. Brown’s precarious grasp of office will make him even less forthcoming about Europe, whereas a Tory government could foster turmoil. David Cameron, the British opposition leader, has promised to pull Tory members of Parliament out of the European People’s Party and might well attempt to renegotiate Britain’s relations with the EU. Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi’s return to office will not facilitate EU cooperation. These factors will contribute to a divided EU whose members will focus mostly on their own political problems.

Working with France

One change that *can* result in better U.S.-European relations and strengthen our ability to cooperate internationally even without an increase in EU hard power is an end

to the poisonous conflict between the United States and France. President Sarkozy’s intention to return France to full membership in NATO in 2009 provides an opportunity for the United States and France to resolve a 40-year-old quarrel.

Since Charles de Gaulle withdrew French forces from NATO’s integrated military command in the 1960s, the French leadership tended to see NATO as an instrument of American hegemony in Europe. The United States, in turn, perceived France as an obstacle to transatlantic unity. After the end of the Cold War, two conflicting theses emerged on the global role of Europe. The Anglo-American vision considered NATO as the

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major instrument of Western security cooperation. The French view was that the EU had its own interests and should have its own foreign policy and the military instruments for implementing it through ESDP (at least for peacekeeping operations). A zero-sum game situation was created in which NATO and ESDP were pitted against each other. What was good for ESDP was not good for NATO, and vice versa, and a low-intensity conflict raged between true believers on both sides. Although there was cooperation between the United States and France over concrete problems, the tone of the relationship was poisoned by this wearisome and demoralizing struggle. The debate, which often seemed to take place on the level of myth, obscured the fact that ESDP was a fairly modest enterprise useful mostly for peacekeeping. Reality corresponded to neither the grandiose aspirations of its proponents nor the existential fears of its critics.

Clearly, this kind of competition reached far beyond the limited military sphere and pervaded the whole U.S.-European relationship. For many in U.S. policy circles, France

was the enemy (the same was true inversely in Paris). The other side of the coin was the widespread feeling on both sides of the Atlantic that when a real crisis developed, the United States and France would work together and France could deliver concrete military assistance. That was the case in the Persian Gulf War and the Balkans crisis of the early 1990s. But the quarrel exploded in 2003 on the occasion of the Iraq War, provoking a full-scale transatlantic crisis and helping to defeat the proposed EU constitution. Both French and American interests were gravely compromised by this episode. France's semi-detached position in NATO is the symbol of the ambivalence in its relationship with the United States, an ambivalence that both Sarkozy and today's Bush administration would end.

Sarkozy understands that France cannot build European defense cooperation against America. The United States now grasps that it is impossible to cooperate effectively with New Europe without including the Old Europe. It has become clear that ESDP and NATO are not incompatible but complementary. Entrenched bureaucracies on both sides of the Atlantic cannot be allowed to destroy French reintegration the way they did in 1995–1997. Both France and the United States recognize the importance of hard power. If they cooperate, they might have a chance of moving the rest of Europe in that direction. The French return to NATO could also facilitate much closer defense cooperation between France and Britain, which would enable Europe to play a more effective role in international security. As Philip Stephens argued, Britain and France both want to maintain the capacity to project power within budgetary constraints.⁵ Sarkozy's pragmatism makes it possible for Britain to work with France without undermining NATO.

Although the French return to full NATO membership will not address the problems of European capacity, it will have significant *political* consequences by facilitating U.S.-European cooperation on many issues. One area in which this can take place is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The United States and France had relatively similar policies on Israeli-Arab issues until the Six-Day War in 1967, after which they diverged. The United States increasingly saw Israel as a strategic partner. On the pretext

that Israel did not heed his advice and that it attacked Egypt when Gamal Abdel Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran, de Gaulle tilted French policy away from Israel. The real reason was that with the end of the Algerian war, de Gaulle saw

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an opportunity to improve relations with the Arab world. De Gaulle considered the United States as an Anglo-Saxon rival in the Middle East, just as France had perceived Britain as a rival (an all too successful one) before World War II. France's "Arab policy" rigidified to the point that even presidential or prime ministerial efforts at rebalancing came to naught.

The divergence between France and the United States over the Middle East was driven by different perceptions of interest and policy in the region, but there is no doubt that the competitive relationship between the two countries was at least a contributing factor. It is also not clear how much France actually benefited from its Arab policy. It certainly did little to achieve a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians since Israelis tended to see France as hostile. Perhaps Arab states felt that the United States was not an honest broker, but it was a superpower and thus its involvement was unavoidable. Sarkozy is

personally more pro-Israeli than his predecessors and has made an effort to appear as a friend to Israel. If an end to U.S.-French conflict can help move both countries (and Europe) to a more balanced position and greater cooperation, they will have more success in managing and ultimately resolving the Palestinian issue.

Implications for American Policy

What does a divided and weak Europe mean for the new American administration? For the sake of argument, let us assume that it shares much of the worldview of its European Allies. Assume it wants to put diplomacy first, is willing to talk to adversaries such as Iran and Cuba, will work assiduously for a two-state solution for Palestinians and Israelis, and will sign up to a serious post-Kyoto agreement on climate change. In short, it would be the kind of U.S. administration that Europeans could only have dreamed of over the past decade.

What will Europe do when this administration asks for help in solving the Iraqi situation? Achieving a solution that leaves a stable Iraq in place but permits an American drawdown as soon as possible will surely be the number one U.S. priority. What will Europe do when its friends in Washington ask for more European forces in Afghanistan? And what if the United States does what many privately discuss in Europe and tests Iran by making a serious attempt to negotiate the nuclear question dossier—and the attempt fails? In short, hard power may be needed even by an American administration that prefers to use soft power, the effective use of which requires the threat of hard power.

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One of the arguments for American unilateralism under the Bush administration was that our European allies had contributed little militarily in combined operations but demanded much in terms of political control—the “war by committee” argument. A failure of Europe to respond to American requests for support will ultimately lead to calls for unilateralism or for neoisolationism—that is, a diminished willingness to engage unless absolutely necessary. Neither is in U.S. or European interest.

The problem is that Europe’s ability to work with (and influence) the United States is limited by its self-imposed weakness in

international security and that this weakness is the logical consequence of the European Union’s political structure and worldview. In the future, America may have no choice but to turn to Asia for support if it wishes to remain an international arbiter. Perhaps a different kind of relationship with a more activist China and India will be needed to manage global instability. If so, the Euro-American age will have come to a close.

Notes

¹ See “European Military Capabilities, Rebuilding Armed Forces for Modern Operations,” transcript of press statement,

Wednesday, July 9, 2008, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London.

² Robert Kagan, “Power and Weakness,” *Policy Review*, no. 113 (June–July 2002).

³ The European Security and Defense Policy constitutes the instrument by which European states can put their forces under a European command to undertake humanitarian or peacekeeping operations. The idea of establishing the framework for European operation without American participation was propounded by the French and initially considered by the United States as an effort to undermine NATO.

⁴ Judy Dempsey, “To be a global power, EU needs security plan,” *International Herald Tribune*, May 10–11, 2008.

⁵ Philip Stephens, “The Pressing Logic of Anglo-French Defence,” *Financial Times*, July 15, 2008.

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